How Fairbury Got Its Name

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Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria east to the Indiana border. City officials prepared the paperwork to request that Congress assign the name to Fairbury and name a postmaster. Since Fairbury was founded in later 1857, Congress was not expected to designate a new post office and postmaster until 1858. Although not officially sworn in, John Coomer volunteered to be temporary postmaster and to use his house as the post office until Congress acted.

Although the official records of the 1858 Congress can not be located at this time, several sources recount that our town was misnamed. Instead of Fairbury, the name of the post office came back from Congress as Fairburgh, Illinois. Congress designated the first postmaster to be Hugh McKee. The Fairbugh post office was established on February 16, 1858.

Many citizens of Fairbury were confused concerning how to spell their town name. Citizens were told it was Fairbury, but the U.S. Government named the post office Fairburgh. Some confused citizens even spelled it Fairburg.

At 4:30 a.m. on April 12, 1861, Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina's Charleston Harbor. This event marked the start of the Civil War. Congress was too preoccupied with the Civil War to concern themselves with renaming a post office.

Forty-three men enlisted in the Union Army and gave their hometown as Fairbury. Another 139 men enlisted and listed their hometown as Fairburgh, Illinois. The State of Illinois maintains an excellent Civil War veteran database. To find all the men who enlisted from our town, one must search for both Fairbury and Fairburgh when researching this topic.

In September of 1861, the Illinois State Fair was held at Brighton, Illinois, near Chicago. The Chicago Tribune noted that H. M. Sillette of Fairburg, Illinois, entered "Jessie Black Hawk" in the horse show. The Tribune misspelled the name of this man. His correct name was Horace M. Gillette. He was a Fairbury businessman and was Mayor of Fairbury later in 1881.

The Wisconsin Historical Society is preserving the papers of Mr. A. Lapham. In 1865, Mr. Lapham prepared a depth chart showing the various types of soil found in a coal mine in Fairburg, Illinois. Mr. Lapham's depth chart illustrated that a four-foot-six-inch thick vein of coal was found 220 feet below the surface. The five Fairbury coal mines all had a five-foot thick vein of coal between 180 and 220 feet below ground.

Several sources indicate the post office name was changed from Fairburgh to Fairbury on April 24, 1866. The 1866 Official Register of the United States noted there was a post office in Fairburgh, Illinois. The postmaster was F. P. Hartley. Mr. Harley's annual pay was $597. This pay would be equivalent to $10,708 in today's dollars.

The 1867 Official Register of the United States noted the post office name had been changed to Fairbury, Illinois. Three men acted as the postmaster in 1867, including F. P. Hartley, Moses Osman, and D. E. Straight.

Although there were newspapers in early Fairbury, no copies of them have survived. The Blade archives start around 1879, well after the city name was corrected to Fairbury in 1866.

Documents and artifacts with the name of Fairburgh or Fairburg from the 1858 to 1866 era are relatively rare. Many years ago, a citizen found a metal nameplate in the area around Walnut and Fifth Streets. The nameplate says, "Manufactured by The Fairbury Carriage Co., Fairburg, Illinois.

At least two envelopes with a Fairburgh postmark still exist today. One neat old photograph shows a horse-drawn wagon in a threshing scene. On the side of the wagon is Fairburgh, IL.

At this time, it is unknown who made the naming error for our town. It took eight years to fix the snafu in the initial paperwork for naming our city Fairbury. This delay was caused by the Civil War, which took place between 1861 and 1865.